9. WAS THERE A VICTORIAN AGE?

Prelude

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way — in short, the period was so far like the present period that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

So Charles Dickens, never a model of conciseness, described the year 1775 in the opening words of *A Tale of Two Cities*, and at the same time makes clear his own belief that in fundamental matters one age is very like another. If he was right, then the habit of christening ages with the names of monarchs — the Georgian Age, the Victorian Age, the Edwardian period, and so on, has no significance except to mark off periods of time.

Even the critics of period labels might be willing to accept, however, that there are clearly marked differences between the ages in externals, in architecture, furniture, dress, and all the other paraphernalia of living. The Victorian Age in this sense creates a readily identified mental picture of Albert watch-chains, imperial beards, bustles, Landseer, gas-lamps, horse-buses, Osborne House, Euston Station, and rooms furnished like souvenir-shops. Whether one moves forward to the bleaker functionalism of modern times or back to the elegant veneer of eighteenth-century society, the external differences between one age and another are sufficiently striking to justify the use of period labels without much risk of contradiction. Argument on external differences of this kind accordingly forms no part of the intention in this chapter. The

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Main focus of the controversy will be the belief, often advanced, that there were characteristic mental and emotional attitudes which were as unique to the Victorian Age as its battlemented terrace houses.

Dickens would clearly not have accepted this belief. Among the general public, however, the word 'Victorian' means something more than bad taste in furniture; it rouses associations which are quite clearly defined. For them the Victorian age is a blend of piety and prejudice, of patriotism and hypocrisy, of self-reliance and snobbery. Historians are less positive in their opinions. It is commonplace to assert that all ages are ages of transition. One age merges imperceptibly into the next, nineteenth-century intellectualism owes much to the eighteenth century, and it also looks ahead to the twentieth century. It would be absurd from this viewpoint to look on the Victorian period as a Procrustean bed with strongly defined mental and moral characteristics neatly chopped off at 1837 and 1901. On the other hand historians are frequently willing to group together a period of years and to name it the Age of this or that, according to their inclinations; the titles of many history books make the tendency plain enough. It may be historically sound, therefore, to accept that there was a Victorian Age if it can be established that it had strongly marked characteristics of its own which differentiate it clearly from earlier and later ages. The popular view of Victorianism, after certain reservations have been made, may still contain a sufficient nucleus of truth to be acceptable; alternatively Victorianism may be a myth.

**Attack**

Perhaps the commonest assumption about the Victorian Age is that it was a religious age, a contrast with the laxity of the eighteenth century and the spiritual nihilism of the twentieth. Family prayers, grace before meals, regular church-going, cross-questioning of children on the content of sermons and lesson-readings, the study on Sunday afternoons of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* — these and other exercises in spiritual discipline gave the nation a certainty in its standards of